

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE CLAUSEWITZIAN TRINITY**  
**IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE**  
**THIRD MILLENNIUM**

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“War is...a wonderful trinity, composed of the original violence of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct; of the play of probabilities and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul; and of the subordinate nature of a political instrument, by which it belongs purely to the reason.”<sup>1</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz wrote this famous definition of the nature of “real war”<sup>2</sup> in the early 1800’s and the meaning and implications of this definition have been vigorously discussed by political and military strategists ever since. Continuing this tradition, I assert the contemporary validity of the Clausewitzian definition of the nature of war by highlighting its timelessness and broad applicability to all forms of human conflict. Secondly, I graphically present an alternative intellectual model of the trinity designed to increase the trinity’s objective validity when examining the wider context of contemporary conflict in advance of war. Finally, I close by more generally applying the alternative Clausewitzian model to a validation of administration policy on International Public Information as documented in Presidential Decision Directive 68.

The first, and perhaps most ingenious, aspect of the Clausewitzian description of the nature of war is its timelessness. Though variously translated from the original German texts written between 1816 and 1830,<sup>3</sup> the three elements Clausewitz uses to define the nature of war are generally agreed today to be passion, reason, and uncertainty. The use of these three concepts imparts an enduring quality to the Clausewitzian nature of war because these concepts define human traits that transcend

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Colonel J. J. Graham, edited by Colonel F. N. Maude (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968) 121

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 124

<sup>3</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976) xi

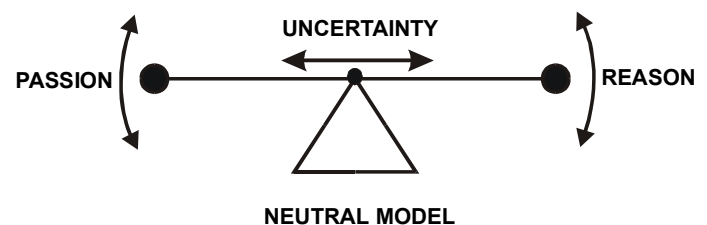
time and are thus, not bound to any particular contemporary setting. This time-transcendent nature completely justifies our use of the Clausewitzian trinity to frame an analysis of any or all parts of current US national and military strategy.

A second ingenious aspect of the trinity is its broad applicability. Passion, reason, and uncertainty are universal concepts that can be used to not only describe war, but also to describe the full spectrum of human conflict. This is important because some form of unresolved human conflict precedes all wars. Clausewitz's choice of the universal concepts of passion, reason, and uncertainty impart a universal applicability to the trinity, justifying its use on the full range of human conflict from total war to terrorism, peacekeeping to peacemaking, and even to conflicts within the individual minds of national leaders and other brokers of power.

The significance of approaching the trinity within the fuller panoramic of human conflict lies in the power it provides us in analyzing conflict in advance of war. The trinity provides a conceptual framework we can use to isolate the cause of conflict and perhaps mitigate or eliminate the effect—war. Additionally, liberal application of the trinity allows us to go beyond the limitations self-imposed by Clausewitz through his primary association of passion, reason, and uncertainty with the people, government, and military commanders of the nation-state. This broad applicability is of particular relevance for intellectually conceptualizing today's world security environment in light of the proliferation of actors, their methodologies, and their degrees of influence. Having laid the groundwork for this broader interpretation and application of the Clausewitzian trinity, how do I propose we employ the power inherent in the pure genius of the trinity to frame and analyze contemporary conflict?

To begin, we must remind ourselves that Clausewitz's nature of war or the broader concept of the nature of conflict, is immutably described by the ever-present, yet ever-changing, interplay between passion, reason, and uncertainty. According to Clausewitz, "A theory which would leave any one of them out of account...would immediately become involved in such a contradiction with the reality, that it might be regarded as destroyed at once by that alone. The problem is, therefore, that theory shall keep itself poised in a manner between these three tendencies, as between three points of attraction."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, Clausewitz posits no method for accurately predicting the point where theory may occasionally come to rest between these three points of attraction. Instead, he leaves us with an image where passion, reason, and uncertainty are three magnets of like polarity set on the points of an equilateral triangle with a fourth magnet, of opposite polarity representing theory, suspended between the three. As such, theory endlessly, and randomly, adjusts itself to the conflicting magnetic fields surrounding it—one random vector leading to the next.<sup>5</sup> The genius in the Clausewitzian trinity is in the analysis of this interaction but the construct is too random and too complex to be of practical value. We need a simpler mental construct if we are to glean a more intuitive sense of real world conflict using the trinity. In this regard, I present this graphical reconstruction of the Clausewitzian relationship—not as a triangle but as a lever and fulcrum.



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<sup>4</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Colonel J. J. Graham, edited by Colonel F. N. Maude (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968) 124

<sup>5</sup> Alan D. Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Importance of Imagery," *Complexity, Global Politics, and National Security*, (Washington DC: National Defense University, 1999) p 158

This variation on the Clausewitzian theme is a variation I feel more correctly models the relationship of the concepts evoked by Clausewitz. In the daily lives of governments, people, military commanders, terrorist organizations, corporations, families, et al., ever-present passion is moderated by ever-present reason. This never-ending balancing act goes on at all levels of human activity and is potentially relevant in the realm of human conflict. This graphic depicts the day-to-day, seesaw battle between passion and reason as the extreme ends of a continuum, forever swinging on the fulcrum of uncertainty—a fulcrum a much younger Prussian, Werner Heisenberg, mathematically proved is a fundamental trait of reality.<sup>6</sup> This lever and fulcrum representation of the trinity directly addresses a key weakness in the more common triangular representation.

When attempting to use the triangular model to debate the character and conduct of a real-world conflict, participants invariably pick a favorite corner and defend it. “It’s reason,” “no, it’s passion,” “maybe it’s uncertainty,” they can be heard to say. This round-robin affair is allowed to continue indefinitely because each opponent is offered an unlimited supply of passion, reason, and uncertainty with which to conduct the debate. Antagonists are allowed to have passion and reason existing in unlimited quantities at the same time. This is impractical. Alternatively, the lever and fulcrum model approaches passion and reason as extreme ends of a continuum. In this way, the antagonists are forced to decide between passion and reason as the dominant issue in a particular scenario from a particular point of view. The model allows only one element to dominate a situation. If neither passion nor reason can be identified as dominant, only uncertainty can tip the balance between conflict and war.

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*, ( New York: Norton & Co, 1999) 112-114

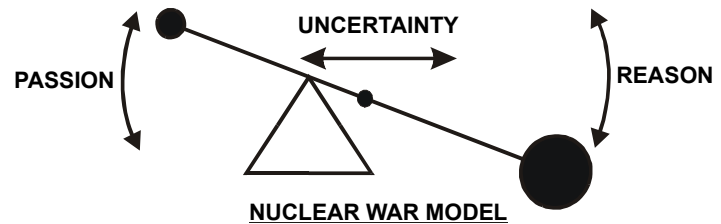
The earlier graphic was labeled the neutral model because all elements of the Clausewitzian trinity are shown in their equilibrium state. Neither passion nor reason outweighs the other in this neutral depiction, nor does uncertainty favor either side. Accordingly, the neutral model, if describing a real conflict, would be of little real value because it would be neither predictive nor probable. The neutral model describes only one of an infinite set of possibilities—a situation where passion and reason are fully at peace with one another and all probabilities are reduced to the toss of a coin. In fact, the neutral model could be argued to be the null model because it represents the ultimate status quo—the ultimate stability the world, the corporation, or the individual so desperately seeks. Alas, this perfect condition is not yet reality, nor according to Heisenberg, will it ever be. Thus, the neutral model itself has value only as a theoretical construct used for descriptive purposes. Prior to putting this model to practical use, there is one more step to accomplish.

The practical application of any model requires the establishment of initial conditions. This model requires us to assert one initial condition in analyzing conflict in advance of war. This condition has a null end-effect on the analysis but without it, the model would become bogged down in endless debate regarding the definitions of passion and reason and points of view. To prevent the initiation of this mental merry-go-round and to enable proper analysis, we will always assume that *initiation of offensive war is an unreasonable act*. Stated another way, the initiation of war is considered the ultimate expression of passion. This is a valid condition because war is typically brought on by motives derived from passionate sources such as fear, paranoia, ego, irrationality, nationalism, disdain, et al. The conditions generating these emotions

and fomenting these motives to war are the targets this model is designed to identify.

Let's try using the model on the extreme case of nuclear war.

In examining the nuclear war model, we can see that reason far outweighs passion. Reason prevails by a wide margin over passion



because nuclear war is generally agreed to be too devastating a route for conflict resolution. Said another way; passions would have to be extremely inflamed for a nation-state to resort to the use of nuclear weapons for the resolution of conflict. This is especially so when we examine the shift of the fulcrum of uncertainty in the direction favoring reason. This shift is an adjustment giving due consideration to the fact that the results of a nuclear war would be far from certain.

From the point of view of the nuclear decision-making entity desirous of seizing the initiative—the entity who would attack—one could never be certain of the results. If the offending entity is a nation-state, nuclear retaliation from other nation-states is a likely consequence. To accept these consequences, the passions of the government, people, and/or the military would have to be atypically enraged beyond reason, something difficult to do in contemporary organized society.<sup>7</sup> This is especially so when the nuclear act can be interpreted as aggressive, unprovoked, offensive action. If on the other hand, the decision-making entity is a terrorist organization or a totalitarian leader of a submissive population, the model is more apt to resemble the Terrorist and

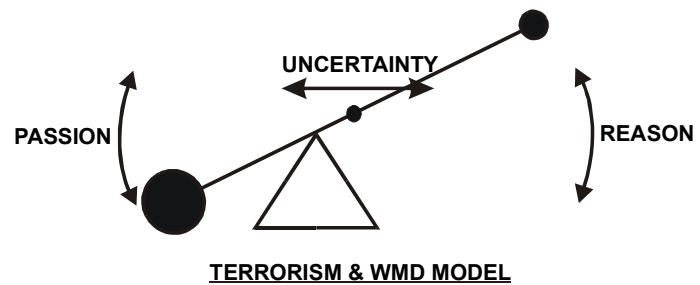
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<sup>7</sup> In re WWII decision to use atomic weapons, reason was predominate over passion—Truman was reluctant to use A-Bombs. However, the certainty of large US casualties in a Japanese home island invasion and the certainty of no Japanese retaliatory capability, shifted the balance in favor of passion and led to weapon use.



Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) model below.

In this model the passion of the terrorist decision-making entity is so high that it outweighs any and all reason, at least from our point of view.



The terrorist may think he's being

reasonable but that hardly matters to us. The point is that a situation appropriately modeled in this way would be dangerous indeed and we are forced to deal with it or accept the consequences. Similar to the nuclear war model, the fulcrum of uncertainty is shifted in favor of reason since the terrorist can in no way be certain of the outcome of his nuclear aggression. However, uncertainty is not a good deterrent to the determined, passionate terrorist. Should the terrorist objective be nothing more than terror, the only defenses available to the prospective victim are to limit access to the target, impede the development of means, or to somehow impinge reason on the mind of the terrorist. From here, we could apply the model to additional examples but the conceptual point is made. I prefer at this point, to proceed to a discussion regarding a more general description and application of Clausewitz's model.

As you may have conjectured by now, the use of the Clausewitzian trinity to model conflict in this manner is somewhat subjective—more art than science. I cannot dispute this assertion but I would respond to it in two ways. First, the business of conflict resolution is by its very nature more art than science. This is so much so the case, Clausewitz himself felt compelled to define “genius”<sup>8</sup> when attempting to fathom

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<sup>8</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Colonel J. J. Graham, edited by Colonel F. N. Maude (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968) 138-158

the mystery of why some leaders succeed where others fail. Of all the concepts posited by Clausewitz, his conception of genius is the most difficult for most strategists to accept because the concept has little basis in scientific fact. As strategists, we're expected to accept the exercise of genius on faith, however reluctantly. As a consequence, logic would imply that almost any model, capable of even partially imbuing our subjective art with a degree of objectivity, should be welcome by the community of strategists at large.

This being so, my second response is simply that we can, in fact, improve the predictive and prescriptive capabilities of the model by making good use of the burgeoning capabilities of the information age while simultaneously using the model to provide structure to our information age efforts. Though we will never totally reduce the nature of conflict and war to the purely objective scientific method, we can use information to better define the elements of the trinity relative to a particular conflict. Simultaneously, we can use the insights gained to better define an information strategy designed to cope with the conflict in question. Even more proactively, we can use the trinity as the unifying principle for our entire National Information Strategy.<sup>9</sup>

We are already developing, implementing, and executing many of the information activities this concept requires. Unfortunately, most of these efforts are being accomplished in isolation and with questionable due regard to the big national and international pictures. Clearly, our national security interests would be far better served if we were to focus our massive governmental information efforts on easily communicable and understandable themes. To this end, I propose we consider availing

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<sup>9</sup> Colonel Jeffrey Jones, "The Third Wave and the Fourth Dimension," unpublished manuscript, 1995, p 3

ourselves of Clausewitz's genius by focusing all government information efforts on three unifying objectives; moderating passion, nurturing reason, and minimizing uncertainty. As a first step, we can edit Presidential Decision Directive 68 to unambiguously reflect these objectives.

In April 1999, the President of the United States signed Presidential Decision Directive 68 (PDD-68) stating the Administration's policy on International Public Information (IPI). The stated objectives of PDD-68, "are to improve our ability to prevent and mitigate foreign crises, and to promote understanding and support for US foreign policy initiatives around the world..." through "...innovative and proactive...use of information assets."<sup>10</sup> The intent of PDD-68 is clear, timely, and mostly welcomed as the first cogent attempt to begin to use our nation's incredible information skill in an organized, multi-agency effort to support foreign policy. The directive also appears to conform concisely with our contention to apply Clausewitz's trinity to real world conflict by better quantifying the passion, reason, and uncertainty of the participants.

As reported by Ben Barber in the Washington Times, the charter of the IPI Core Group charged with implementing PDD-68, is to "influence the emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups and individuals."<sup>11</sup> In other words, PDD-68 is an attempt to directly influence the passion, reason, and uncertainty underlying the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in full compliance with our Clausewitzian model. For this reason we would be prudent to edit the directive's objective statement in a way more easily understood and communicable. At present, the directive is too easily

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<sup>10</sup> Presidential Decision Directive 68, United States Government, April 1999, p 3

<sup>11</sup> Ben Barber, "Group Will Battle Propaganda Abroad," *Washington Times*, 28 July 1999

misinterpreted as just an adjustment of US national propaganda organs to information age developments. This leaves foreign entities with little incentive to trust the product and domestic agencies, so critical for its success, with little incentive to depart from business as usual. Rewording the directive along the following, clearer Clausewitzian lines could go a long way towards breaking this logjam.

*‘The objective of PDD-68 is to use information and information technology to improve our ability to prevent or mitigate foreign crises and conflict by moderating their underlying human passions, by promoting a climate of reason, and by minimizing uncertainty. The desired end state is a world where foreign nations and their citizens perceive US foreign policy objectives as consistent with their own and in support of peace and stability.’*

When worded in this manner, our clarity of purpose shines through, as does our hope for true partnerships. We appear as though we’re willing to listen and then do something about what we hear.

In the 20th Century the nations of the world gave vent to their passions in degrees appalling to all but the most unreasonable. Yet, each time, intelligent men thought they were being reasonable. If Clausewitz’s trinity teaches us nothing else, it should make it clear that resort to war is never an act of reason—always of passion. By defining the real nature of war, Clausewitz gave us the means to defend ourselves from it, providing us the insights we need to abort its birth or limit its life. The lever and fulcrum model is a plausible way to analyze conflict in advance of war while providing the underlying structure both our information age efforts and the model require for success. In the early days of the third millenium, the character and conduct of war may be changing, but its nature remains ever defined by passion and reason competing in uncertain minds.